

**Primary Source Document
with Questions (DBQs)**

**LETTERS FROM U.S. PRESIDENT MILLARD FILLMORE AND U.S.
NAVY COMMODORE MATTHEW C. PERRY TO THE EMPEROR OF
JAPAN (1852-1853)**

Introduction

In 1852, Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry (1794-1858) was dispatched to Japan by U.S. President Millard Fillmore (1800-1874) in command of four warships, including two steam frigates. The squadron arrived in Uraga harbor, near the Tokugawa capital of Edo, on July 8, 1853. As expressed in the following letter from President Fillmore to the Japanese Emperor, delivered by Perry to the worried Tokugawa officials who greeted him, the United States was eager to break Japan's "seclusion policy," sign diplomatic and commercial treaties, and thus "open" the nation to the Western world. For the Japanese, who had carefully regulated overseas contacts since the seventeenth century and whose technology could not compare to that displayed by the American squadron, Perry's arrival and President Fillmore's letter were unwelcome and ominous, even if not entirely unexpected.

Commodore Perry stayed in Uraga for fewer than ten days in 1853, withdrawing to the China coast with his ships. As he promised in his letter of July 14, 1853, however, he returned to Japan about six months later with a much larger and more intimidating fleet, comprising six ships with more than 100 mounted cannon. In March of 1854, the Tokugawa shogunate capitulated to all the American demands, signing the Treaty of Kanagawa with Perry.

Selected Documents with Questions

Letter from President Millard Fillmore and first letter from Commodore Matthew Perry from *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to China and Japan, performed in the years 1852, 1853, and 1854, under the Command of Commodore M. C. Perry United States Navy, by Order of the Government of the United States*, compiled by Francis L. Hawks, vol. I (Washington, D.C., A.O.P. Nicholson, Printer, 1856), 256-259. Second letter from Commodore Matthew Perry from *Meiji Japan through Contemporary Sources*, Volume Two: 1844-1882, compiled and published by the Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, c/o The Toyo Bunko, Honkomagome 2-chome 28-21, Bunkyo-ku; Tokyo, 113 Japan. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

**From Millard Fillmore, President of the United States of America,
to His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor of Japan
November 13, 1852**

GREAT and Good Friend: I send you this public letter by Commodore Matthew C. Perry, an officer of the highest rank in the navy of the United States, and commander of the squadron now visiting your imperial majesty's dominions.

I have directed Commodore Perry to assure your imperial majesty that I entertain the kindest feelings towards your majesty's person and government, and that I have no other object in sending him to Japan but to propose to your imperial majesty that the United States and Japan should live in friendship and have commercial intercourse with each other.

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U.S. NAVY COMMODORE MATTHEW C. PERRY TO THE EMPEROR OF JAPAN (1852-1853)**

The Constitution and laws of the United States forbid all interference with the religious or political concerns of other nations. I have particularly charged Commodore Perry to abstain from every act which could possibly disturb the tranquility of your imperial majesty's dominions.

The United States of America reach from ocean to ocean, and our Territory of Oregon and State of California lie directly opposite to the dominions of your imperial majesty. Our steamships can go from California to Japan in eighteen days.

Our great State of California produces about sixty millions of dollars in gold every year, besides silver, quicksilver, precious stones, and many other valuable articles. Japan is also a rich and fertile country, and produces many very valuable articles. Your imperial majesty's subjects are skilled in many of the arts. I am desirous that our two countries should trade with each other, for the benefit both of Japan and the United States.

We know that the ancient laws of your imperial majesty's government do not allow of foreign trade, except with the Chinese and the Dutch; but as the state of the world changes and new governments are formed, it seems to be wise, from time to time, to make new laws. There was a time when the ancient laws of your imperial majesty's government were first made.

About the same time America, which is sometimes called the New World, was first discovered and settled by the Europeans. For a long time there were but a few people, and they were poor. They have now become quite numerous; their commerce is very extensive; and they think that if your imperial majesty were so far to change the ancient laws as to allow a free trade between the two countries it would be extremely beneficial to both.

If your imperial majesty is not satisfied that it would be safe altogether to abrogate the ancient laws which forbid foreign trade, they might be suspended for five or ten years, so as to try the experiment. If it does not prove as beneficial as was hoped, the ancient laws can be restored. The United States often limit their treaties with foreign states to a few years, and then renew them or not, as they please.

I have directed Commodore Perry to mention another thing to your imperial majesty. Many of our ships pass every year from California to China; and great numbers of our people pursue the whale fishery near the shores of Japan. It sometimes happens, in stormy weather, that one of our ships is wrecked on your imperial majesty's shores. In all such cases we ask, and expect, that our unfortunate people should be treated with kindness, and that their property should be protected, till we can send a vessel and bring them away. We are very much in earnest in this.

Commodore Perry is also directed by me to represent to your imperial majesty that we understand there is a great abundance of coal and provisions in the Empire of Japan. Our steamships, in crossing the great ocean, burn a great deal of coal, and it is not convenient to bring it all the way from America. We wish that our steamships and other vessels should be allowed to stop in Japan and supply themselves with coal, provisions, and water. They will pay for them in money, or anything else your imperial majesty's subjects may prefer; and we

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request your imperial majesty to appoint a convenient port, in the southern part of the empire, where our vessels may stop for this purpose. We are very desirous of this.

These are the only objects for which I have sent Commodore Perry, with a powerful squadron, to pay a visit to your imperial majesty's renowned city of Edo: friendship, commerce, a supply of coal and provisions, and protection for our shipwrecked people.

We have directed Commodore Perry to beg your imperial majesty's acceptance of a few presents. They are of no great value in themselves; but some of them may serve as specimens of the articles manufactured in the United States, and they are intended as tokens of our sincere and respectful friendship.

May the Almighty have your imperial majesty in His great and holy keeping!

In witness whereof, I have caused the great seal of the United States to be hereunto affixed, and have subscribed the same with my name, at the city of Washington, in America, the seat of my government, on the thirteenth day of the month of November, in the year one thousand eight hundred and fifty-two.

[Seal attached]

Your good friend,
Millard Fillmore

By the President:
Edward Everett, Secretary of State

Questions:

1. How would you describe the tone of President Fillmore's letter?
2. Why does the president mention that he has dispatched Perry "with a powerful squadron"?
3. If you were the emperor of Japan, how would you respond to this letter? How would you explain and justify the Japanese seclusion policy to President Fillmore?

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**From Commodore Matthew C. Perry
to His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor of Japan
July 7, 1853**

*United States Steam Frigate Susquehanna
Off the Coast of Japan*

To His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor of Japan,

THE undersigned, commander-in-chief of all the naval forces of the United States of America stationed in the East India, China and Japan seas, has been sent by his government of this country, on a friendly mission, with ample powers to negotiate with the government of Japan, touching certain matters which have been fully set forth in the letter of the President of the United States, copies of which, together with copies of the letter of credence of the undersigned, in the English, Dutch, and Chinese languages, are herewith transmitted.

The original of the President's letter, and of the letter of credence, prepared in a manner suited to the exalted station of your imperial majesty, will be presented by the undersigned in person, when it may please your majesty to appoint a day for his reception.

The undersigned has been commanded to state that the President entertains the most friendly feelings towards Japan, but has been surprised and grieved to learn that when any of the people of the United States go, of their own accord, or are thrown by the perils of the sea, within the dominations of your imperial majesty, they are treated as if they were your worst enemies.

The undersigned refers to the cases of the American ships Morrison, Lagoda, and Lawrence.

With the Americans, as indeed with all Christian people, it is considered a sacred duty to receive with kindness, and to succour and protect all, of whatever nation, who may be cast upon their shores, and such has been the course of the Americans with respect to all Japanese subjects who have fallen under their protection.

The government of the United States desires to obtain from that of Japan some positive assurance that persons who may hereafter be shipwrecked on the coast of Japan, or driven by stress of weather into her ports, shall be treated with humanity.

The undersigned is commanded to explain to the Japanese that the United States are connected with no government in Europe, and that their laws do not interfere with the religion of their own citizens, much less with that of other nations.

That they inhabit a great country which lies directly between Japan and Europe, and which was discovered by the nations of Europe about the same time that Japan herself was first visited by Europeans; that the portion of the American continent lying nearest to Europe was first settled by emigrants from that part of the world; that its population has rapidly spread through the country, until it has reached the shores of the Pacific Ocean; that we have now large cities, from which, with the aid of steam vessels, we can reach Japan in eighteen or twenty days;

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that our commerce with all this region of the globe is rapidly increasing, and the Japan seas will soon be covered with our vessels.

Therefore, as the United States and Japan are becoming every day nearer and nearer to each other, the President desires to live in peace and friendship with your imperial majesty, but no friendship can long exist, unless Japan ceases to act towards Americans as if they were her enemies.

However wise this policy may originally have been, it is unwise and impracticable now that the intercourse between the two countries is so much more easy and rapid than it formerly was.

The undersigned holds out all these arguments in the hope that the Japanese government will see the necessity of averting unfriendly collision between the two nations, by responding favourably to the propositions of amity, which are now made in all sincerity.

Many of the large ships-of-war destined to visit Japan have not yet arrived in these seas, though they are hourly expected; and the undersigned, as an evidence of his friendly intentions, has brought but four of the smaller ones, designing, should it become necessary, to return to Edo in the ensuing spring with a much larger force.

But it is expected that the government of your imperial majesty will render such return unnecessary, by acceding at once to the very reasonable and pacific overtures contained in the President's letter, and which will be further explained by the undersigned on the first fitting occasion.

With the most profound respect for your imperial majesty, and entertaining a sincere hope that you may long live to enjoy health and happiness, the undersigned subscribes himself,

M. C. Perry,

Commander-in-chief of the United States Naval Forces in the East India, China, and Japan seas

Questions:

1. How does the tone of Commodore Perry's letter to the Emperor differ from that of President Fillmore's letter of 1852?
2. Do Perry's priorities in opening Japan to contact with the United States differ from those expressed by President Fillmore?
3. What does Perry write that is intended to reassure the Japanese about America's intentions? What does he write that might be interpreted as intimidation?
4. Why does Perry stress that the United States "do not interfere with the religion of their own citizens, much less with that of other nations" and emphasize that America is fully separate from the nations of Europe?

From Commodore Matthew C. Perry
[Sent in Connection with the Delivery of a White Flag]
July 14, 1853

For years several countries have applied for trade, but you have opposed them on account of a national law. You have thus acted against divine principles and your sin cannot be greater than it is. What we say thus does not necessarily mean, as has already been communicated by the Dutch boat, that we expect mutual trade by all means. If you are still to disagree we would then take up arms and inquire into the sin against the divine principles, and you would also make sure of your law and fight in defence. When one considers such an occasion, however, one will realize the victory will naturally be ours and you shall by no means overcome us. If in such a situation you seek for a reconciliation, you should put up the white flag that we have recently presented to you, and we would accordingly stop firing and conclude peace with you, turning our battleships aside.

Commodore Perry

Questions:

1. What do you think happened between the delivery of Perry's first letter and this short note?
2. How does the tone of this document differ from Perry's earlier letter and President Fillmore's letter?
3. What do you think the "sin" and "divine principles" that Perry writes of here are? How do you think the Japanese who received this note would have understood these terms?
4. If you were the Tokugawa shogun, how serious would you take Commodore Perry's threats?